

1-1-1998

Film Review: Cop Land

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Recommended Citation

Morrison, James. Rev. of Cop Land, dir. James Mangold. *Film Quarterly* 51.4 (Summer 1998): 28-32.

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Review

Cop Land

Writer/director: James Mangold. Cinematographer: Eric Edwards. Editor: Craig McKay. Music: Howard Shore. Miramax.

In his past roles, Sylvester Stallone's hang-dog countenance, sleepy with mournful aggression, has concealed explosive, righteous rage. In James Mangold's *Cop Land*, it reveals entrenched and stubborn melancholy. Despite a climactic shoot-out with cool overtones of *Taxi Driver*, the explosion never really comes. Stallone's face—its droopy, baleful gaze, downturned lips, nascent jowls—bears the imprint of this movie's distinctive sensibility as surely as Pruitt Taylor Vince's pasty, moist-eyed face did that of Mangold's previous film, *Heavy*; and Stallone's performance as Freddy Heflin, the small-town sheriff who wanted to be a big-city cop, is the film's unlikely set-piece, to be admired, like so much in the film itself, for everything it does *not* do.

On the strength of *Heavy* and his new film, Mangold appears to be striving to forge an authentically

ascetic style within the decidedly inhospitable climate of contemporary Hollywood. His decision to follow the anomalously quiet *Heavy* with a police-procedural that appears at least superficially to be in the up-to-the-minute blockbuster mode feels a bit like an exercise, an experiment in spiritual temptation-and-resistance, and the news here is that Mangold has *not* sold out, as so many young filmmakers do after a first independent hit. Once the conventions of the genre have been set in place, Mangold goes on to work against every one of them in a manner that might feel systematic if that impulse too had not been rejected as too worldly. In fact, although the film carefully chronicles the textures of its characters' lives, it does so almost entirely in their moments of repose. The inertia of the film's action sequences feels calculated, the sign of the movie's tone of detached curiosity—sometimes tender, sometimes doleful. Although the movie carries the force of subdued conviction, it's difficult at first to locate that conviction, because the film has little interest in exploring the usual subjects or provoking the ordinary audience responses typical of the police-procedural genre. It's a cop movie steeped in stillness.

The film's dramatic situation is rooted in a casually audacious fiction. A tightly knit group of cops migrates from New York City to a burg across the river: Garrison, New Jersey—"population 1280," a road



Sylvester Stallone as Freddy Heflin in *Cop Land*.

sign informs us in an offhanded and uncharacteristically sly nod to the title of a Jim Thompson thriller about a criminal sheriff, filmed by Bertrand Tavernier as *Coup de Torchon*, a film which in its dour, quiet style is an important forerunner of *Cop Land*. In Garrison, the cops stake out territory to live apart from the depredations of the city while continuing collectively to manipulate networks of corruption from a safe distance, running drugs for the mob. A title informs us at the end of the film, if we weren't aware of it already, of the fictive status of this central conceit. In fact, New York police officers are required to live within the city limits. This is no small point, for it reveals the insularity of the film's vision of the contemporary American sociocultural landscape.

A pivotal plot event is an instance of racial violence at the beginning of the film. An unseasoned, hot-headed cop known as Superboy shoots two black men in a highway skirmish, then feigns suicide with the aid of his cronies to escape investigation, fleeing back to Garrison. But the movie's interest in the causes or effects of racial violence is so limited that a few scenes that would be crucial in a more conventional piece are rendered almost completely opaque in this film. For example, we get a glimpse of a black spokesperson decrying the media emphasis on the cop's suicide over the deaths of these "black children," and the comically inappropriate designation of the murdered punks is

presented in feyly broad, sourly satirical terms. The moment seems here less indicative, however, of the paradoxically hysterical intellectual complacency of DePalma's film than it does of a sort of committed indifference to the sociology of current realities in Mangold's film. The film is not oblivious of racial politics, but its account of the genesis of corruption does not reside in the standard versions of urban anomie. The vision of the city in *Cop Land* is largely free of the fulminating Scorsesean moral horror or the virulent Schraderesque disgust one finds in a film like *Taxi Driver*, in part because Mangold is interested in the image of the metropolis only insofar as it sets into relief the meditation on private consciousness and small-town torpor that are the film's true concerns. In *Cop Land*, New York isn't a circle-of-hell or a pervasive state-of-being, the oppressive projection of a dankly morbid consciousness, but just a place you look at from across the river; and if the city is thus deprived of the infernal aspect it is routinely granted in such films, it is also thereby denied the geeky mythic grandeur or the lame-brained romance so typical of lesser manifestations of the genre—*Night Falls on Manhattan*, say, or the remake of *Kiss of Death*.

A quality of obliquity in the narrative's construction defuses any real sense of urgency in the film's cop-movie theatrics. (The one later scene involving careening police cars and frenzied officers running in



Peter Berg
(center) and
Arthur J.
Nascarella
(right).

all directions feels totally obligatory and, by that point in the film, decidedly out of place.) During an early scene of exposition, Heflin glances out the precinct window and sees a mother drive away with her kid's toy, a stuffed green turtle, on the roof of her van. This collateral set-up pays off later, but it functions at the time as a mark of the eccentricity of the movie's construction, its abiding concern with sidewise detail. Again and again Mangold displaces the drama of a given scene with such seemingly peripheral observation, or neutralizes volatility by angling a scene through the perspective of a calm or marginal observer—usually the doggedly passive Heflin. The distancing effect of such strategies enables a double focus on the cop-movie material, potentially satisfying the viewer who wants that but also allowing the gradual emergence of the movie's real subjects in the margins.

With like obliquity, Mangold's previous film told the story of an overweight restaurant owner (Pruitt Taylor Vince) in love with a beautiful waitress (Liv Tyler). Recognizing the hopelessness of this desire, he doesn't even try to articulate it to anyone, and as a result his inner life grows so remote even to himself that when his mother dies he doesn't tell anyone about that either. It's a film with a deep reserve of feeling for the unspoken and a hushed, evanescent atmosphere of delicacy—you watch it breathlessly, the way you'd watch a lovely, tiny bird that might take flight at the slightest movement. It's filled with Ozu-like cutaway-shots to transfixing sky-scapes or inserted nonnarrative tableaux with a formalized, still-life quality, and the fragility of the film's texture derives from the balance between such techniques and a methodical observation of the operations of diurnal ritual in characters' lives.

As *Heavy* demonstrated, Mangold's keenest feelings as a director appear to be for the textures and the rhythms of small-town life, and the conceit of *Cop Land* allows Mangold to play those textures and rhythms against the more conventional materials of the police-procedural action-adventure film. In its treatment of these themes, the earlier movie concerns the relation between states of transfixedness and states of fixation. The promise of spiritual escape in *Heavy* is predicated on an arrested emotional condition—and the film is interested in both the promise and the condition—that makes escape finally impossible. The movie's main characters are constantly discovered in day-dreamy postures of concentration—mooning at the sky, or looking at photos of one another—which are nearly indistinguishable from their moments of

distraction, as they gape at TV screens or swap banal small talk. In the middle of the night, they park at an airport and watch planes take off, and in an inspired lyric gesture, Mangold refuses to show the planes (except in the film's first and last shots, where we see distant planes in vacant skies with no clear observer), showing in these moments only the reflections of their lights on the car windows or playing on the awe-stricken, upturned faces, stunned with pleasure, of the watchers whose hopeless aerial aspirations are stoked by the dazzlement of what they see and we do not. Through such poetic counterpoint, the scenes manage simultaneously to convey wonder and lack. The restaurant owner fantasizes saving the waitress from drowning, and the fantasy soon takes on the aura of a familiar hallucination. With its pensive gravity, the movie carefully shows how what is obsessive shades over into what is quotidian.

Cop Land has a different feeling, but it's surprisingly not as different as one might expect, and it shares a number of concerns with the earlier film while presenting them in a more literalized, plot-bound form. The movie deals with secret maneuvers and covert operations, but unlike more standard cop movies, it provides next to no exposition for the viewer, letting the secrets emerge by implication rather than explication. Even when all the characters are in on something—the plot to hide Superboy, the assorted entanglements and adulteries of the cops and their wives—the viewer is often left out, left to fit the pieces together through accumulation. The film's closest connection to *Heavy* is through Stallone's character, Heflin. Prevented from being a New York cop by deafness in one ear sustained in his youth during the heroic rescue of a drowning woman, Heflin lumbers through the daily routines of small-town sheriff-hood with a blank, amiable obliviousness, stopping repeatedly to gaze across the river at the city with the same kind of distracted concentration with which the characters in *Heavy* inhabit their lives. Constantly shadowed by the looming cityscape, the town of Garrison becomes an archetypal image of unfulfilled aspiration. Simply by bringing them together, *Cop Land* exposes the dual (and competing) myths of small-town America as at once the stronghold of clean living and pure values and the repository of crushed hopes and abandoned dreams, the haven of those who couldn't cut it in the big time.

The emotional textures of delusion, self-aggrandizement, and failed aspiration are the film's real interest, and just about every star performance in the film surprises us by revealing some new aspect of



Sylvester
Stallone
and Ray Liotta.

these textures. Having assembled such a constellation—Stallone, Robert DeNiro, Harvey Keitel, Ray Liotta—Mangold arranges the stars into a genuine ensemble instead of an aggregate of disconnected star turns. He doesn't do this by asking them to play against type. In some ways, indeed, the performances of the most familiar actors here play like mildly restrained pastiches of their previous roles. Keitel brings to his part the self-important, slightly philistine leisure-suited smoothness of his recent gangster roles with a submerged self-hatred which has associations that go back to his performance in *Fingers* (1978). Ray Liotta, meanwhile, incorporates his trademark coiled, desperate anger with an impatient humaneness. DeNiro as an Internal Affairs officer draws on something of the righteous moral solemnity that has cropped up in some of his recent performances, like the one in *Sleepers*, but he gives it a spin with residual echoes of, say, his Rupert Pupkin from *The King of Comedy*, sporting a 70s haircut, polyester blazers, and a shaggy mustache, and giving a sing-songy derision to some of his intonations, as when he tells Stallone, "You bleeeew it!"

It may be simply our familiarity with these actors in Scorsese movies that enables them to gel here, but the self-referential quality of the acting allows the incorporation of others into the ensemble so that even Stallone, who is in some ways cast against type, ap-

pears to be not so much departing radically from his usual persona as he is returning to some of the attitudes of his mid-1970s film performances. There is a kind of consistency in this ensemble that comes in part from the mosaic quality of the movie's structure, setting lots of subplots in motion but not granting real primacy or giving sustained attention to any subplot at any one time. In larger part, though, this consistency comes from the decision to make Stallone the mutable center of the ensemble. The result is that, because we see the other performances continually as they play off Stallone's less expressive performance, their performances are toned down by Stallone's function as a foil, and all the actors seem to be doing the same thing, geared toward the same end.

Stallone's performance can't exactly be called restrained, though its rhetoric is that of understatement, because you don't really feel there's anything that would be coming through if it were not being held back. It's a little like watching some of Marilyn Monroe's performances, especially the later ones, in *Some Like It Hot* or *The Misfits*, where Monroe's palpable effort to remember what she had been told to do in front of the camera translated into an ineffable, clumsily ethereal vulnerability. Stallone is capable of achieving nuances in the role: the way his voice breaks in a scene with Annabella Sciorra playing the woman he has saved, for instance, or the paltry

bravado he musters when he tells a group of schoolkids to move along "before I kick your ass." But the poignance of the performance clearly comes less from the performance itself than from the way the director uses it; some of the effects Mangold gets this way could almost be called Bressonian, and the irrevocably alienated quality of the final seige links it as surely to *L'Argent* as to *Taxi Driver*.

When Heflin realizes Superboy is still alive and decides to bring him in, the movie might have turned up the emotional thermostat, taken an urgent turn toward the thematics of redemption, as in Scorsese. But Mangold uses Stallone's performance to insure that the film remains focused instead on the lassitude of inevitable failure. Stallone walks through the final shootout like the Terminator, and the showdown itself is robotic and without volition, like something out of Fritz Lang. Despite the film's overriding concern with interiority, it has little concern with the dynamics of epiphanic insight, and its end brings no redemption. The explanatory aftermath provided by DeNiro's voice-over is notably perfunctory, and the last se-

quence shows Heflin still gazing across the river with what can by this time no longer be called yearning. Stallone's performance is a remarkable found object, beautifully used: it is not only *about* absence but, in crucial ways, it *enacts* that condition, illustrates it, making the film's meditation on oblivion all the more piercing. The blankness of Stallone's final look, itself evanescent, not lingered over, feels emotionally wrenching only in memory, after the film is over. It is then that you realize the film has been about not the sadness of unfulfilled desire, but about the sorrow of desire that persists after its origin is lost, when it no longer matters whether the object of desire—the ubiquitous city across the river, or the woman the empty-faced man might once have loved—vanishes or remains.

■ James Morrison teaches film in the English Department at North Carolina State University, and is the author of *Passport to Hollywood: Hollywood Films, European Directors*, forthcoming from SUNY Press.

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